

Stages of Democracy

*Exploring the political capacity of theatre
for the design of a representative public square in Tallinn*

P5 Reflection

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A Matter of Scale

Chair of Methods of Analysis & Imagination

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Project Description

Synopsis

Stages of Democracy is the imagination of an alternative material reality, in which the park next to the Estonian parliament is not merely a place for recreational activities, but also acknowledged as a site for the representation of the public. Consequently, the proposal aims to build upon the traditions of the site rather than replacing them; nationalising the private sports field at the foot of Toompea Castle opens up the opportunity to add to its uses by providing infrastructure for public events.

Exterior

The main architectural intervention is a new theatre, which provides a protected indoor environment for the square to remain usable all year round, including the harsh Estonian winters. Built along an existing retaining wall and partially carved into the hill, the building's volume is carefully placed to minimise its impact both on the available space for public gatherings and the ecology of the site. The external appearance of the theatre is defined by a large colonnade, which places the building in the lineage of western architectural canon. The use of proportion and a strong order evokes a sense of publicness widely associated with classicism, while the brick skin hints at the expressionist style of the interwar period, when the government buildings of the independent Estonia were built. The roughly treated bricks form an interlocking pattern, as if the monolithic Toompea hill got fragmented to little pieces, which then reassembled to form something greater than the sum of their parts.

Interior

The structural strategy becomes immediately apparent when entering the building: a series of trusses span between the retaining wall and the columns, creating one large volume inside, with services boxed away. The back wall is latched onto the retaining wall via small steel sections which overlay a new grid over the existing; the interior is characterised by the expression of this grid through secondary steel elements such as the balustrades, the theatre gridiron, or the furniture. The retractable seating units of the auditorium can be rearranged for various stage layouts and can be easily rolled out to the square for events, while telescopic tower units – following a similar logic - provide loudspeaker, camera, and broadcast towers for these occasions. The roof of the theatre is an almost seamless continuation of the ground held by the retaining wall; almost, because three steps signal that it is artificial ground, and yet another stage for the public. Vertical cores at the two ends of the building provide access from the inside: near the entrance, an extruded core contains a lift, a staircase, and technical risers, while a tower at the other end allows for theatre equipment to be lifted up. This tower, however, exceeds far beyond the roof, and serves as a beacon for 'looking the president in the eye', and as an appropriable infrastructure for the public to present their claims using Toompea castle as a backdrop.

Scale

It is not accidental that out of the basic elements of architecture, it is the column and the tower which characterise the project. At a place which is about the physical presence of humans, about seeing bodies and being seen, these vertical elements are important reference points. As suggested by the etymology of words like 'capital' (from late Latin capitellum 'little head'), their origins lie in comparisons to the human body, and therefore relate the human scale (bodies) to the architectural (column) and the urban (tower).

Reflection on Process

P1

As explained in the Graduation Plan, the project stems from my personal fascination for the spatial representation of politics, which the chosen studio not only allowed, but encouraged me to pursue. During the development of the Research Plan, a solid theoretical framework was laid which clarified which issues of public spaces I aim to address. The studio-led analytical activities gave a basic understanding of processes that shaped the public spaces of Tallinn, while the excursion allowed to connect the - sometimes abstract - historical framework to its tangible results in the built environment.

P2

In the research plan, a catalogue of gatherings and monuments was proposed. The former was made as planned, and it has been quintessential for choosing the site for the project, both for finding the location and determining its size. The latter was not made as such, but its aims were realised through other exercises: I looked at the plans and styles of government buildings in Tallinn which influenced the façade design, and as part of the site survey I studied the stairs in Toompark, which directly informed the design of the external staircase in the project.

P3

The research question I embarked on answering with a design proposal was the following: *How can the immediate vicinity of the Estonian Parliament be transformed through architectural interventions to accommodate spaces appropriate for performative representation?*

In answering this question, I embarked on a trial-and-error of testing numerous schemes and approaches, continuously evaluating them. However, this question did not provide any guidance for choosing between the options; therefore, the weeks spent at this level felt unproductive in terms of progression and material produced. This could have been avoided had I documented the process in a more systematic and professional manner, rather than in the chaotic pages of my sketchbook. In hindsight, I realise the research question I thought of can be better understood as the sum of two questions. This realisation does not render the original research question obsolete but helps explaining the aforementioned issues in the process.

The first question is concerned with how the site *should* be transformed to accommodate the desired spaces. Phrasing the problem this way brings forth the element of subjectivity, and asks for a well-argued design approach which I feel is appropriate for the project. Addressing this question head on would have certainly streamlined the process, but the relentless trial-and-error approach eventually led to the concretisation of my position. The dichotomy I struggled with the most was permanence and ephemerality; exploring the tension between the two became the main architectural investigation I undertook, which I believe the proposal addresses in a novel and innovative way. The theatre building *could* be disassembled and taken away leaving no more than its foundations; however, it *appears* as it belongs to the site, as it is the metamorphosis of this part of the hill into an architectural object.

P4

The second question is concerned with the evaluation of how the chosen intervention *would* transform the site and accommodate the new uses, which has been explored through physical model-making. The project materialised via three models, from the urban through the architectural to a detailed scale, bringing it to life.